

the photograph, which is available along with other photographs of the species in the Pests and Diseases Image Library.

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Silent lodgers and uninvited guests: arthropods found in a suburban house

We share our home with many different kinds of arthropods. The 'silent lodgers' (mostly spiders) generally live inside, while the 'uninvited guests' (mostly flies and moths) enter from time to time via the external doorways, and often end up as food for the lodgers.

When we moved in, silverfish, clothes moths and carpet beetles abounded. I did battle with them for a long time, with minimal effect. Then one day I saw a Daddy Long-legs spider feasting on a silverfish. From then on I let the Daddy Long-legs have the run of the house (well, up to a point). After a while it was extremely rare to see a silverfish, while the number of clothes moths was also greatly reduced. Once these prey had become scarce, I discovered that Daddy Long-legs also prey on other spiders, such as White-tailed spider, Black House spider, wrap-around spider (Fig. 1), young huntsman spiders, and even other Daddy Long-legs (Fig. 2). They in turn are preyed upon by spitting spiders (Fig. 3). Nothing seems to eat carpet beetles, however, and although we threw out the carpet more than 10 years ago, a few still remain.

White-tailed spiders put in an appearance during warm, dry weather, usually at night; Black House spiders, though present, are secretive and not often seen; tiny greyish brown spiders (*Oecobius* sp.) live on the cornice, windowsills and behind the skirting boards; and various species of jumping spiders manage to make a



Fig. 1. Wrap-around spider.



Fig. 2. Daddy Long-legs feeding on another Daddy Long-legs.



Fig. 3. Spitting spider with Daddy Long-legs.



Fig. 4. Spitting spider.



Fig. 5. Huntsman.

living on the window frames. There are numerous other small spiders, including several that I have seen only once.

One type of small spider, a spitting spider, used to live in a drawer in our kitchen. When I discovered it I was amazed at the number of moth wings under the dish I was about to use: until that moment I hadn't realised that any moths were present! Needless to say I was very grateful to this spider. Spitting spiders don't build a web, but immobilise their prey with a shower of sticky spittle produced in special glands in the cephalothorax. Some of these spiders have an abdo-

men similar in size to the cephalothorax (Fig. 4), while others have a smaller abdomen (Fig. 3).

Huntsman spiders, because of their relatively large size, are the most conspicuous spider visitors (Fig. 5). They enter the house occasionally, usually when rain is imminent. Their habit of keeping at least a couple of legs on the cornice ensures that they stay – often for several days – until they venture to a spot where I can catch them easily. I used to leave them inside, but now that the weather is drier and fewer suitable prey enter the house, I prefer to put them outside where they have a better chance of survival.



Fig. 6. Black cockroach with dusty feet.

Over the past six years, black cockroaches have become increasingly common here. During dry weather they come inside looking for moisture, and sometimes drown in buckets of 'grey' water. When disturbed in an open area such as on a wall, these insects 'play dead', dropping to the floor and lying motionless on their backs. One black cockroach had the misfortune to fall into a dusty glass bowl that had been left outside the back door. Fibres in the dust collected on three of the insect's legs (Fig. 6) as it repeatedly tried to climb out and then slipped back. It was very slow-moving when I found it, maybe from exhaustion caused by trying to escape, or because the fibres on its legs slowed it down, or a combination of both.



Fig. 8. Moth.



Fig. 7. Moth fly.

At Christmas time in 2006, about 20 green praying mantid nymphs came inside on the potted *Pinus radiata* that we bring inside each festive season. We didn't notice them until they climbed onto a wall. Since the weather was hot, they welcomed a drink of water before being returned to the garden. Unfortunately I missed one and later found it dead on a windowsill.

The sudden appearance of numerous blowflies inside invariably indicates that a rat has died under the house. On one such occasion we found that the flies were entering through a small gap between the skirting board and the wall behind the lounge. A Black House spider was quick to take advantage of the situation, guarding the gap and catching some of the flies as they came through.

Perhaps our most surprising visitor was a small fly resembling a crane fly but with furry antennae. I wasn't aware of its presence until I started icing a chocolate cake. It suddenly appeared, settled purposefully on the plate and fed from the chocolate icing! Although I would have liked to know how long it would feed for, my time was limited, so after taking a number of photographs of the insect I shooed it away and – regrettably – never saw it again.

The most puzzling 'uninvited guests' are tiny (2 mm long), hairy-winged moth flies that appear at the back door, enter as soon as it is opened, and end up dead on the windowsill. Since these insects live and breed in damp places, I find this



Fig. 9 Moth.

behaviour difficult to understand. By contrast, a larger (approximately 3 mm long), dark grey moth fly (Fig. 7) that spent a day in our bathroom was in an appropriate habitat.

Mosquitoes are particularly annoying at night when we are trying to sleep: that unmistakable high-pitched whine near our heads soon has us leaping out of bed in search of the culprits. Their ability to disappear completely until the lights are out again is quite amazing.

Small black or brown ants, always a nuisance, periodically invade the kitchen and bathroom. A mixture of sodium tetraborate and honey usually sees them off, but for ants that aren't interested in honey, meat juices make a reliable substitute.

The most unwelcome 'uninvited guests' we ever had were hundreds of Honey bees that settled into a wall cavity via ventilation holes in the external brick wall, and proceeded into the kitchen through a small gap in the windowsill. I felt a bit sorry for them because they were only looking for somewhere to live, but we couldn't have them staying with us!

I have discovered that the variety of visitors is actually far greater than casual observations would suggest. From time to time, prior to doing the dusting, I collect dead creatures from the windowsills, place each one in methylated spirits in a container labelled with the date, and store the containers in boxes. The resulting collection contains a tiny orange mite, a



Fig. 10. Moth.

dozen types of spiders, two types of cockroach, a green praying mantis nymph, four different bugs, a green lacewing, a Brown Lacewing, 11 tiny beetles, a small black beetle, a darkling beetle, about 30 types of flies, a similar number of moths, 14 wasps and two ants. Many of the beetles, flies and wasps are only two or three millimetres long.

There are also many 'uninvited guests' that don't end up dead on the windowsills. I photograph as many of these as I can before evicting them. Some of the most beautiful are the moths, with their intricately patterned wings (Figs. 8-10). I certainly don't have to travel very far to find an abundance of natural wonders.

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